Magnetic Lifter

Joe T. Howell/PS05
205–544–8491
E-mail: joe.howell@msfc.nasa.gov

Achieving an affordable and reliable launch infrastructure for low-cost, routine access to space is one of the enduring challenges of the space age. In a marketplace dominated by expendable launch vehicles grounded in the technology base of the 1950's and 1960's, diverse innovative approaches have been conceived since 1970 for reducing the cost per pound for transport to low-Earth orbit. For example, the Space Shuttle—a largely reusable vehicle—was developed in the 1970's with the goal of revolutionizing Earth-to-orbit transportation. Although the Shuttle provides many important new capabilities, it did not significantly lower space launch costs. During the same period, a variety of other launch requirements (e.g., for vehicle research and development and microgravity experiments) have been met by relatively expensive, typically rocket-based solutions (e.g., rocket sleds and sounding rockets).

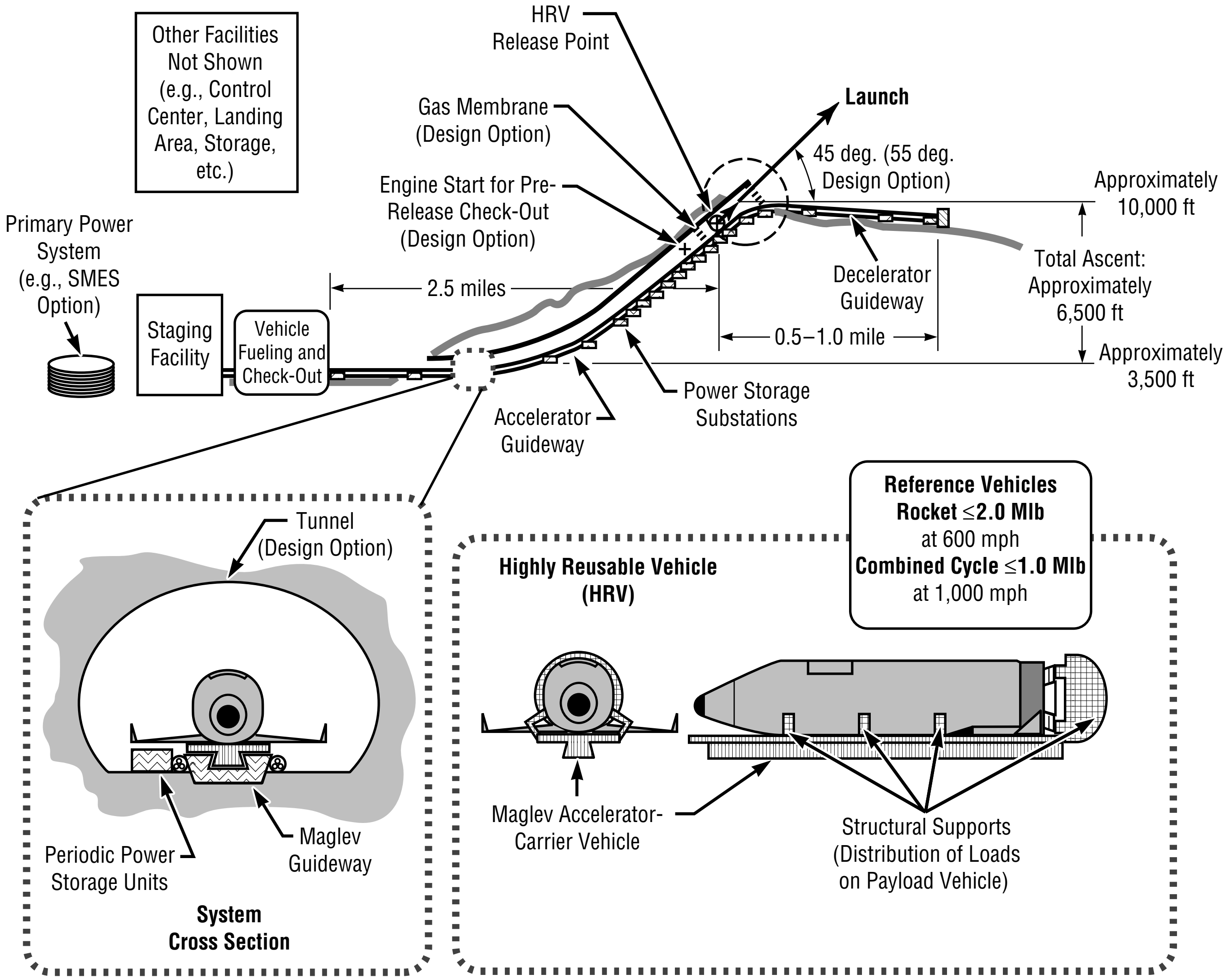

FIGURE 15.—MagLifter Space Launch System (configuration " i "): Notional, full-scale system concept. This version of MagLifter is configured for a highly reusable vehicle that does not involve the use of aerodynamic lift during launch (i.e., a ballistic ascent trajectory).

There are several basic strategies for cost reduction, including: (1) reducing the cost of hardware expended in launcher systems per pound of payload, (2) increasing the reusability per flight of highly reusable vehicles, and (3), for both of these, reducing the cost of launch operations. A variety of space launch concepts is still under study in this context, ranging from single-stage-to-orbit vehicles to “big, dumb boosters,” and from air-breathing hypersonic Earth-to-orbit vehicles like the National Aerospace Plane to advanced rocket concepts such as space nuclear thermal propulsion. Some exotic concepts involving “gun-type” systems have also been studied.

However, past analyses of launch systems involving electric propulsion have been largely limited to electromagnetic versions of “cannons,” such as rail guns and coil guns. Despite significant theoretical advantages, these systems have had both technical and programmatic difficulties in maturing beyond research and development and prototype-level demonstrations.

A new approach, involving the use of superconducting, magnetically levitated (“maglev”) and propelled vehicles, has been

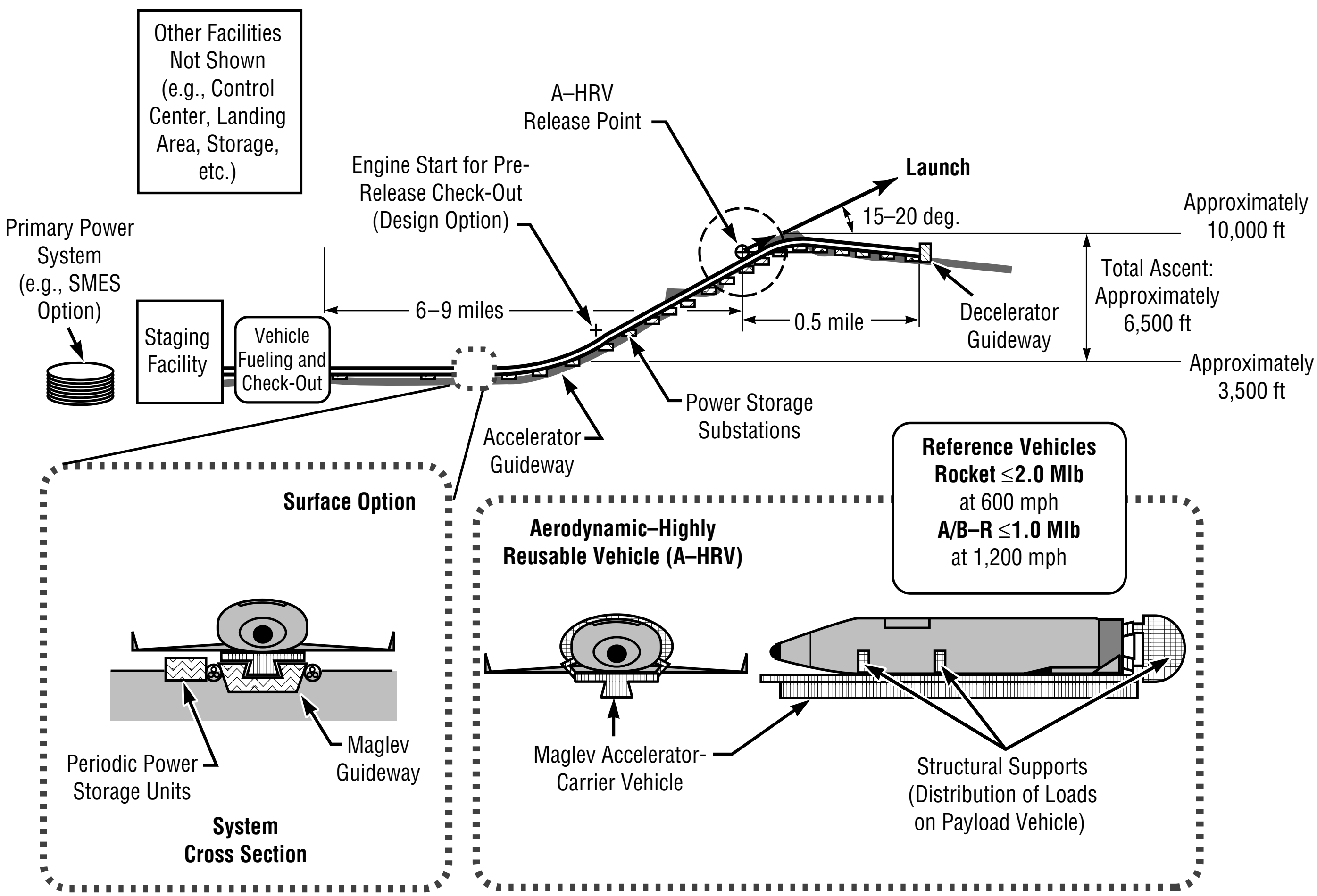

Figure 16.—MagLifter Space Launch System (configuration “j”): Notional, full-scale system concept. This version of MagLifter is configured for a highly reusable vehicle that does involve the use of aerodynamic lift during launch.

developed. Three configurations of the MagLifter concept shown in figures 15, 16 and 17 combine the technology base of maglev systems being proposed and demonstrated for terrestrial applications with the best planned improvements in expendable launch and/or highly reusable vehicle systems. Together, the results suggest dramatic improvements in Earth-to-orbit costs may be possible. The MagLifter draws on a heritage of electromagnetic launch concepts and technical literature, but embodies several new technical characteristics which have not been thoroughly considered to date.

The Magnetic Launch assist shown in figure 18 depicts the goal of a magnetic launch assist concept, potential developing technologies, maglev testing and flight demonstration. A strong synergism exists between the magnetic lifter technologies and the multi-use technology applications involving other Government agencies and private industries.

Sponsor: Office of Space Access and Technology; Advanced Space Transportation Program

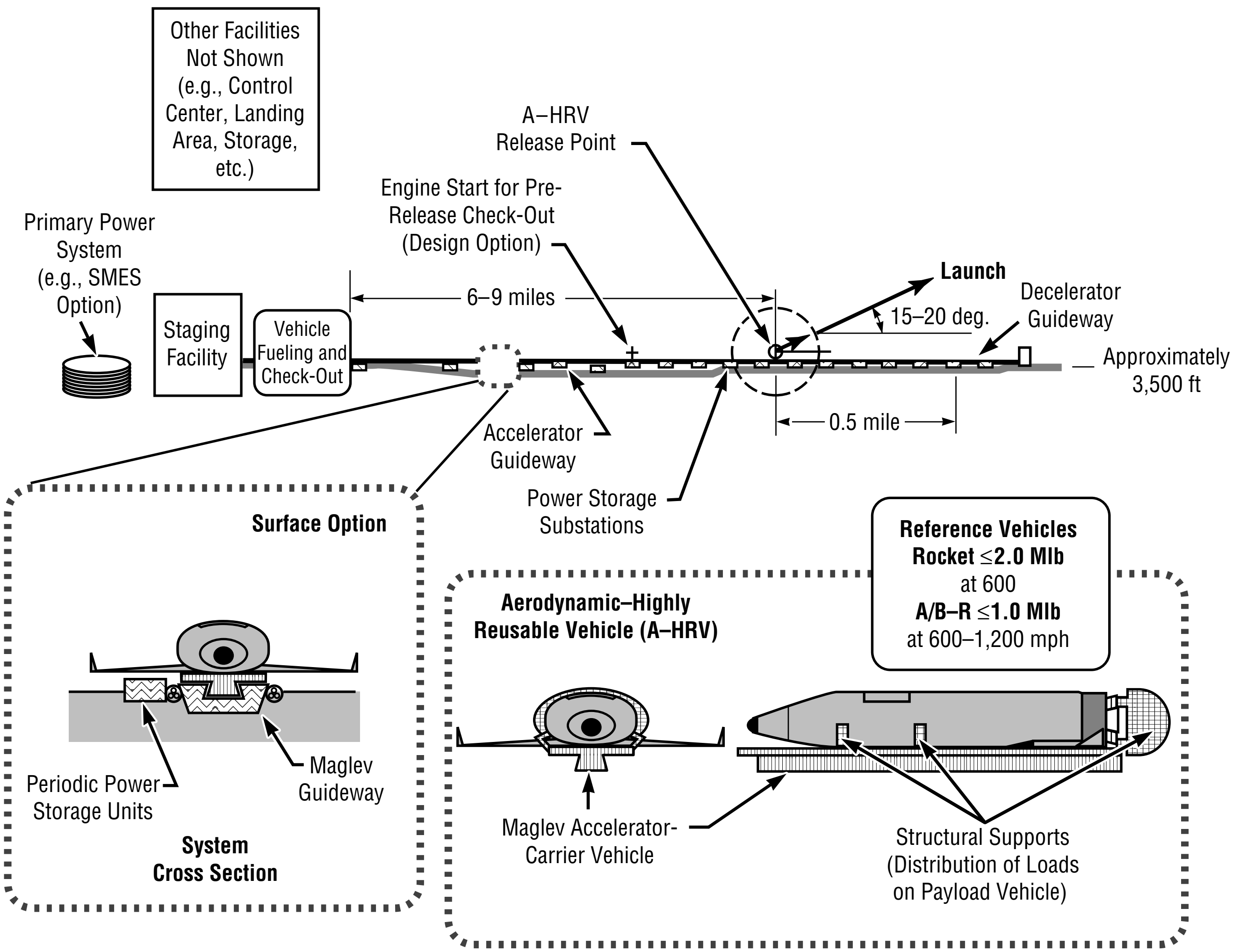

FIGURE 17.—MagLifter Space Launch System (configuration "k"): Notional, full-scale system concept. This version of MagLifter is configured for a highly reusable vehicle that does involve the use of aerodynamic lift during launch and runs horizontally—0-degree inclination—at release of HRV.

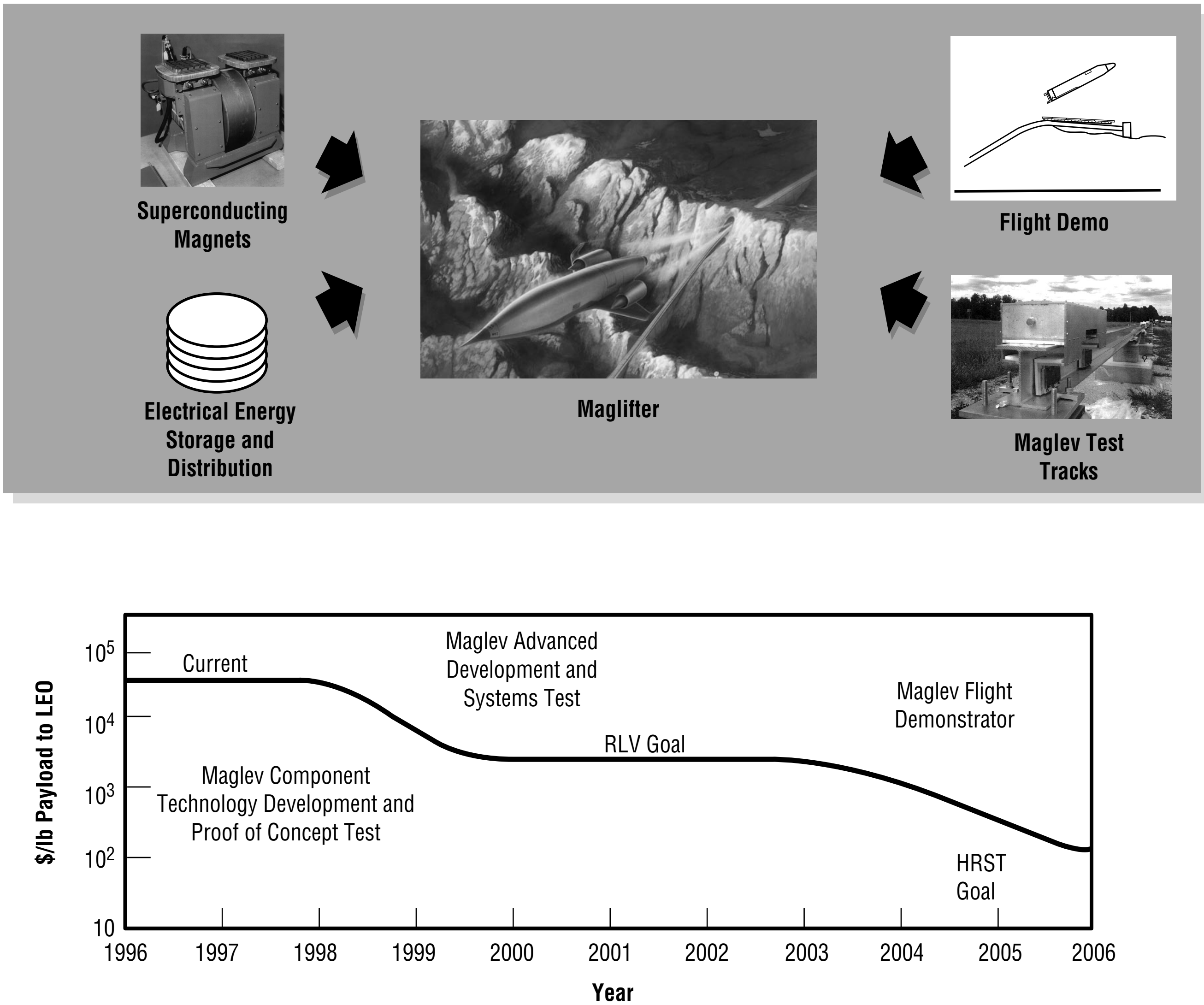

FIGURE 18.—Magnetic launch assist, technologies, and goal.

Biographical sketch: Joe T. Howell is an aerospace engineer. He serves as a project lead with responsibility for performing advanced systems planning involving conceptual and preliminary design definition studies, and analyses of space systems for advanced concepts. Howell attended Auburn University, earning a B.S. in mechanical engineering. He received a master's in engineering science at the University of Tennessee.